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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 005185

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SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KPAO](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: EGYPTIAN MEDIA LEGEND IBRAHIM NAFEI SHOWN THE DOOR, REPLACED BY LOYAL PROTEGE

Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

REF: A. CAIRO 5057

[1](#)B. CAIRO 4127

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Of all the changes to the pro-government press leadership announced by the Shura Council on July 3 (ref A), most significant is the replacement of media giant Ibrahim Nafei, former Editor-in-chief and Board Chairman of Al-Ahram. Nafei, who was appointed Editor-in-chief by Anwar Sadat, leaves behind a weakened newspaper, allegations of corruption, and a loyal replacement, Osama Saraya. His replacement was part of the Egyptian Government's attempt to put a 'new face' on government institutions and encourage an impression of reform and progress in anticipation of the year's presidential and parliamentary elections. End summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) The replacement of media giant Ibrahim Nafei, former Editor-in-chief and Board Chairman of Al Ahram, is the end of an era in the Egyptian pro-government press. Nafei, who was appointed Editor-in-chief in 1979 by Anwar Sadat after working his way through the ranks of Al-Ahram as an economic reporter and editor, was considered the most prominent 'mouthpiece' (some would say, 'apologist') for the Mubarak government for the past 25 years. Nafei was also head of the Egyptian Press Syndicate, serving from 1985 to [1](#)1994. On the one hand, Nafei was known for 'taking care of the troops' at Al-Ahram and the syndicate - giving Al-Ahram journalists large annual bonuses; building new office spaces at Al-Ahram; and, as head of the Press Syndicate, appealing to the government whenever a journalist was arrested or imprisoned, no matter the journalist's politics. On the other hand, Nafei leaves behind management problems and allegations of corruption.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Rumors of Nafei's replacement heated up this year after Al-Ahram published an unprecedented "correction" on May 15 for having 'misprinted' an interview President Mubarak granted to Kuwaiti daily Al-Siyassa (reftel B). NDP Secretary General and Shura Council Head Safwat El Sherif

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reportedly was angered with Nafei over the interview and began to murmur darkly about "big changes" in the pro-government press. Sherif also reportedly mistrusted Nafei's influence with the presidency, which he felt was "out of bounds" of his position, according to PA contacts. As rumors of changes in the media continued the past two months, PA contacts at Al-Ahram reported that Nafei believed his position was safe, given his relationship and long history with the presidency.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Nafei leaves behind a loyal replacement, Osama Saraya, as Editor-in-chief. (The Al-Ahram Board Chairman position went to Salah Al-Ghamri, the former head of Al-Ahram's distribution.) Saraya was previously Editor-in-chief of the weekly magazine Al-Ahram Al-Arabi and is pro-reform. Nafei 'discovered' Osama Saraya through Saraya's uncle, a former managing editor with Al-Ahram. Saraya began as a trainee in Al-Ahram's economic section, where he gained Nafei's trust. (Note: Embassy Cairo helped Saraya extensively in the early years of his career, providing him with many exclusive stories and contacts. Saraya has always had an open door policy with Embassy officers and visiting USG officials. End note.) A senior Al-Ahram journalist told PA LES on July 5, "Osama is like Nafei's son. He sees Ibrahim as his idol and role model." The journalist commented - as have other Al-Ahram contacts - that Nafei, who will continue to write a column for the newspaper, will exercise behind-the-scenes influence at Al-Ahram through his relationship with Saraya.

[1](#)5. (SBU) Comment: Nafei's legacy is a weakened newspaper, Al-Ahram having seen its influence wane with the rise of pan-Arab satellite TV channels and pan-Arab newspapers such as Lebanon's Al-Hayat and the Saudi-owned Al-Sharq Al-Awsat. Nafei has also been dogged by persistent allegations of corruption, with PA contacts alleging that Nafei used his position to enrich himself through questionable property and publishing deals. Additionally, overemployment and mismanagement plague Al-Ahram. PA contacts report that too

many Al-Ahram editors spend too little time at their desks, writing an occasional column rather than actively managing their oversized staffs.

16. (SBU) Despite the bad blood between Sherif and Nafei, the latter's replacement was likely part of the Egyptian Government's attempt to put a 'new face' on government institutions. The word on the Egyptian street is that pro-government newspapers like Al-Ahram are too pro-Mubarak and cannot be trusted. By putting newer faces in leadership positions, the government may be attempting to encourage in the public a sense of reform and progress in anticipation of the year's presidential and parliamentary elections. However, Saraya, who is known for his pro-reform arguments on pan-Arab satellite TV, will likely continue Nafei's legacy of Mubarak-friendly coverage and commentary. It remains to be seen if Saraya has the skills to successfully shake-up Al-Ahram and reposition it as the region's leading Arabic newspaper. End comment.

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